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What's ultimately at stake

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The Reagan administration's suspected entanglement in funding the Nicaraguan resistance with arms sales to Iran has prompted Senate Intelligence Committee Vice Chairman Patrick Leahy, Democrat of Vermont, to respond that he isn't interested in resignations but in indictments and prison terms.

Whether the affair stops at the level of a political circus or develops into a criminal prosecution, the accomplishments and goals of the Reagan agenda could be unraveled, pulling down in the process the effort to restore American power and influence in world affairs.

Ultimately at stake is the conservatives' challenge to the establishment view that American power is a source of tension, hostility, and instability in international affairs and cannot be exercised without broad-based consent in the world community.

In coming months the question, "What did he know and when did he know it," and the power struggle that turns on the answer will produce a drama sufficiently rich in implications to divert attention from other fundamental questions. It is even possible that we will pay the cost of another assault on the presidency without learning the lessons that the episode has to teach.

One lesson is that Congress no longer believes in the separation of powers and has been expanding its own power into the domain of the presidency. This raises problematic questions about the weight given to the national interest in the political process, because, as Republican Sen. Barry Goldwater of Arizona told *The Washington Post* in his farewell interview last month, Congress today represents far narrower interests than previously.

When he was first elected to Congress, members "put their country before their district or their state," but "the average member of Congress today puts more importance on his district or his state than he does on his country."

The declining ability of represen-

tative government to act in the national interest is an ominous development for a country that, like it or not, is locked in a struggle with the Soviet Union.

It is easy to see how the erosion of presidential power leads to events such as those recently revealed. A political agenda gains the White House only to discover that there is little power there.

At the same time, the discovery is made that important agencies of the government, such as the CIA and the State Department, are so constrained by the narrow loyalties of inbred bureaucracies and ideologies of accommodation and negotiation that a president cannot act on his agenda regardless of his electoral mandate.

The presidency finds that it cannot get its ducks in a row and that if it wants to act it is forced into unofficial channels. The pressure from the inability to get anything done goes underground and squirts up in unexpected ways.

If the Reagan presidency is unraveled, it might be the final defeat of presidential resistance to bureaucratic government.

Another lesson is that pragmatists who find power more enticing than principle work to deprive the administration of "inflexible" voices of principle. This clears the way for the dealmakers who enjoy the action for its own sake. People who stick to principle make fewer deals, but better ones.

The pragmatist takeover of the Reagan administration, cheered by the media, guaranteed the destruction of a principled foreign policy. The shifting winds of pragmatic policies make it easy for those inclined to action to lose their way.

There are other lessons to be learned. A country that flays itself before a world audience will not be taken seriously in world affairs, regardless of the size of its GNP or the number of its warheads. We can rationalize that we are giving governments of men a lesson in the rule of

law, but the lesson will be lost in the spectacle. Most governments prefer to be stronger rather than weaker. The rule of law will be observed chewing up American patriots, and this result will compare with the Ayatollah Khomeini's power to stop all public questioning of Iran's negotiations with "the great Satan."

For Americans, the most important lesson of this episode is that if our governments are to be successful, their policies must communicate to the people an affirmation of our principles — something that presidents find it difficult to get our sophisticated bureaucratic elite raised on a diet of skepticism to do. But without faith in our principles, our leaders are forced into secrecy and manipulation, and their policies fail by arousing the distrust of the people.

In the end the pragmatist flounders among principles, the skeptic distrusts them, and the realist discards them. This exhausts the alternatives and leaves firm adherence to principle as the only politics for a democracy.

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